

Hidden and Triumphant

The Underground Struggle to Save Russian Iconography



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Irina Yazykova Translated by Paul Grenier
Foreword by **Wendy R. Salmond**



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
THE RUSSIAN ICONOGRAPHERS
WHO PRESERVED THIS GREAT TRADITION
DURING THE TIME OF PERSECUTION.

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FOREWORD



It is one of the many ironies of the past century that the celebration of Russian icons went hand in hand with a determined effort to eradicate the art of icon painting. In exchange for the icon's physical survival, Soviet ideology demanded a purging of its theological meaning and function, filling the void with content more palatable to a secular age. Histories written during that era tacitly accepted this state of affairs, taking for granted that the icon's home was now the museum and its relevance largely aesthetic and historical.

In this important new history of the Russian icon, Irina Yazykova challenges this familiar picture in the light of our own historical moment. Far from withering away during the Soviet years, she affirms, the practice of painting icons survived underground and with the fall of Communism has emerged triumphant. The icon now stands on the threshold of a new epoch, and we are witnesses to the fervent search for an iconic language that reflects the realities of our own experience.

So that we may see the icon once more in its entirety, the author invokes the centrality of the canon, the tradition of a precise language of visual signs by which the Orthodox believer experiences the presence of God. The icon preserves the canon by standing at the border between two worlds, awakening the viewer's spiritual vision through the workings of the physical eye. All icons are canonical when outer form and inner content harmonize, bringing the viewer face to face with the world of spirit in a state of prayerfulness. Like a heartbeat, eternal time flows through such icons, undisturbed by the restlessness of human time reflected in the history of continual stylistic change.

Unlike other histories that make us passive observers of icons from a lost golden age, this book suggests that we take a more active engagement with icons if we are to reach a fuller understanding of their role in the past and their relevance for the future. The author teaches us to discern in all icons that state of equilibrium between the eternal and human, past and present, aesthetic and theological, that was temporarily disturbed by the upheavals of the last century. At once scholarly and impassioned, this wonderful book is more than another updated history. It is a guide to understanding the fullness of the icon's meaning by expanding the limits of our own vision, spiritual as well as physical.

Dr. Wendy Salmond is Professor of Art History, Chapman University, and author of *Russian Icons at Hillwood* and *Tradition in Transition: Russian Icons in the Age of the Romanovs*.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE



One of the peculiarities of Russian scholarship is an occasional casualness when it comes to details about sources. While it is true that many Russian scientists are just as punctilious as their Western counterparts in this regard, in many other cases—especially in the humanities, and including the present work—one fairly regularly comes across quotations without detailed information as to the source.

In large part this “lack” can be explained by the two-fold relationship of the Russian writer both to her audience and to tradition. First of all, there is the assumption that the audience is aware of a certain cultural tradition—for example, that “everyone” has read certain books. In such a context, providing too much information can at times be not only superfluous but even impolite.

Those familiar with continental writing styles will be aware of another source of this difference in authorial styles. In Russia, as in France, Germany, and elsewhere on the continent, the author (like the professor) has a different stature than in the United States. Rather than being a sort of service provider, she is an authority. There is not the expectation, either on the part of the reader or the author, that “everything must be provided.”

Incidentally, this often means that a scholarly text in these other countries will be almost impossibly dense. It is well known, for example, that a French student will often pick up an *American* text if what is wanted is a perfectly clear explanation of some difficult subject. Fortunately, the present text, in this respect at least, is sufficiently American.

This cultural gap represented one of the many challenges in translating this first-rate work of Russian scholarship. References in the text that were unlikely

to be transparent to a non-Russian-speaking audience I have attempted to contextualize—most often by means of a content footnote (all the longer and more involved ones are my own), or, when it seemed unavoidable, even with in the text itself. The reader is entering into a different tradition here, and the only way to fully comprehend it is through immersion.

INTRODUCTION

WORD AND IMAGE

An icon is the visual image of what is invisible.

*It is given to us that our understanding may be
filled with its sweetness.*

—ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS



Orthodox tradition and icons are inseparable from one another. It is difficult to even imagine an Orthodox church or an Orthodox home without icons. Whether a person is entering into holy matrimony or a monastic order, setting off on a long journey, or beginning some new business enterprise—one way or another, icons will be present. Icons accompany us from the moment of our birth to the hour of our death.

The word *icon* comes from the Greek εἰκόν, which means image, representation, or portrait; and it refers, first and foremost, to an image of Jesus Christ. Being the true image of God, Christ is considered the only perfect icon, as he said, “He who has seen Me, has seen also the Father” (John 14:9). The apostle Paul also calls Jesus an icon of God: “He is the image (εἰκόν) of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:5).

Icons reveal to us the very depths of the Christian faith—that the all-powerful, mysterious, and unknowable God, whom no prophet has ever seen (Exodus 33:20), comes down from heaven and, through the mystery of the Incarnation, takes on flesh and becomes human. Saint John the Theologian tells us likewise: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us full of grace and truth, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father” (John 1:14). The Creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, appeared on earth as the God-man Jesus Christ.

An icon brings the good news into the world by showing the face of Jesus Christ: God became man. Moreover, through Christ, the icon also reveals to us the true image of humanity transfigured and deified; it is the image of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom that is to come and that will restore the harmony now marred by sin.

How is it possible, though, to depict the divine harmony through earthly means? How can one convey that for which our hearts and souls pine? As everyone knows, to see certain stars we need a telescope, and to see a cell we need a microscope. In just the same way, we need a special sort of lens to see the divine realm. That special lens is the icon: an image that discloses a different world.

Saint John of Damascus, the renowned eighth-century theologian and defender of the veneration of icons, defined the purpose of icons: "An icon is the visual image of the invisible, given to us that our understanding may be filled with its sweetness."

Of course, even if we can depict Jesus' human nature, this does not mean we can successfully portray his divine essence. That aspect remains unknowable. An icon uses such symbols as the halo, rays of light, and so forth as indicators of his divinity. Since Christ's divine and human natures are neither merged nor separate, depicting Christ's human image must also put us in the presence of his divinity.

Not all icons portray Christ. There are also icons of the Mother of God, of saints and angels, and of various sacred events. Yet not every picture on a religious theme can be considered an icon. Within Eastern Orthodoxy a special language has been developed for icons, and this language is deeply rooted in a theology of visual signs, a canon that is understood as the visual expression of the dogmas of the faith.

The look of icons has gradually changed over the centuries, evolving from the general and symbolic to the more concrete and representational. During the early period Christ typically was depicted through the use of allegorical symbols such as a fish or a lamb. Those images were gradually replaced by icons portraying the Savior in his human form (icons of the so-called historical type) accompanied by signs and symbols of his divinity.

From these portraitlike images, the icon gradually evolved in a more symbolic and ritualized direction, tending all the while toward images

depicted on a flat plane. The envelope of the body, in icons, became surrounded by the uncreated light and seemed to lose all material weight, accentuating the spirituality of the image over its materiality.

Now, icons are even more a manifestation of the flesh transfigured and emanating light. Orthodox art made a conscious decision against naturalistic, three-dimensional representation in order to emphasize the primacy of spirit over matter. For the same reason, it rejects sculpture, which likewise tends to stress the material principle (Orthodox art admits at most the low projection from the surface of bas-relief). Nonetheless, the saints depicted in icons are not bodiless spirits; they are material beings whose matter has been transformed by spirit and filled with light. In the icon we find a unity of Spirit and matter, of heaven and earth, of the visible and the invisible.

An icon is not an abstract depiction of spirituality. It is a representation of the holiness shining forth from a specific historical personage. The concrete subject matter for the icon painter's brush can be found in the face of Jesus Christ, who manifested himself within human history. It is *this* light of Christ that is considered to be reflected in the face of each saint represented in an icon.

When we approach an icon, we find ourselves looking into a world where eternal light reigns, a place where, in the words of the psalms, "mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have embraced each other" (Psalm 85:10). In icons the contradictions of this world are resolved: here, God is "all in all."

An icon is painted both in prayer and for prayer, for the purpose of teaching us to see the world as God and the saints see the world: as already redeemed and transfigured, made new under God—a world conquered by love.

One often hears that Orthodox Christians pray to icons, but that is not altogether accurate. Yet it is true that those of Orthodox faith pray to God while standing before an icon. But the prayer in each instance is addressed to Jesus Christ as the image (or icon) of God, as it is Christ that the icon ultimately represents.

An icon of the Mother of God portrays not simply a pious and lovely woman, but the woman through whom Christ came into our world. That is why most icons depict Mary holding Jesus in her arms.

If an icon depicts a saint, its real purpose is to bring us face to face with someone in whom Christ's goodness shines forth. Long before there were any icons, Saint Paul wrote, "My little children, of whom I travail again in birth, until Christ be formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). In icons, as in Orthodox tradition, a saint is someone who has been formed by Christ and in whom we find the light and countenance of Christ.

There are also thematic icons focusing on events that reveal Christ's glory and triumph. Such events may be derived from the New or the Old Testament, an episode in the life of a saint, or the history of the church. Regardless of the context, in every case, even if Christ's form as such is absent, his presence is implied. And in prayer with icons, each image serves to concentrate and focus our spiritual sight, directing our prayer to the center of being, toward God who appeared to us in the face of Jesus Christ.

In order to express this focus on Christ, a special pictorial language was gradually developed in iconography: it is this language that forms what is called the iconic canon. The existence of this canon should not be understood as some iron cage circumscribing the freedom of the icon painter. Rather, it represents simply a central core of meanings that ensure that the iconic image is filled with the appropriate doctrinal and theological content.

This canon first came together during the ninth century, when the Slavic peoples were converting to Orthodoxy. And history has confirmed the wisdom of the founding fathers of iconic art when they established the iconic tradition as a visual witness to faith that appeals more to the heart than to the intellect. That is why icons have been so effective at spreading the faith throughout the Slavic world, and particularly in Russia, where throughout many centuries they served as the primary instrument of theological instruction.

A painting, it is sometimes said, offers us a window onto the world. An icon does the same, except that it offers us a window into the invisible world. It portrays not what we encounter in everyday life, but instead a *transfigured* world. "Icons depict nothing whatsoever: they make manifest to us the kingdom of heaven," says the renowned contemporary icon painter Archimandrite (Vladimir Teodor) Zinon, also known as Abbot or Father Zinon.

The iconic world is seen by the soul, not by the eyes. An icon does not tell us what Christ looked like—it is not a portrait in the traditional sense,

but allows us to stand directly before the face of Christ, the God who acquired a human countenance. More than anything else, what an icon presents to us is the *personhood* of Christ. As Saint John of Damascus wrote: “I saw the human face of God, and my soul was saved” (paraphrasing Genesis 32:30).

In this same language of icons, a depiction of a saint is similarly not a portrait, but an image of the saint standing before God. The purpose of this type of icon is to invoke our prayerful appeal to the saint and also our joining with the saint in prayer to God.

The saints are almost always depicted directly facing us. Only rarely do we find an icon with a saint in profile: this pose usually is reserved either for a negative personage, for instance, Judas in the scene of Jesus’ arrest in the garden, or for a secondary figure who is not a saint and not a participant in our communal prayer, for example, the women washing the infant Jesus in the icon of the Nativity.

An icon is not a fragment of heaven, but a manifestation of the fullness of being. For this reason, only rarely does a figure or a scene extend into the margins of the icon, and even then only slightly. When we place ourselves before icons, we see a world that is whole.

We are also witnessing an image of eternity, a world of completed time, which is why the world of icons looks so different from our own. They have their own space and time where the laws of this earthly plane do not apply. Illogical spatial relationships and reverse perspective serve to accentuate this difference.

For example, the iconic principle uses what is known as a reverse perspective, which differs from geometric perspective in that it gives us no vanishing point toward which all lines converge on the horizon. With icons, objects do not get smaller in proportion to their distance from our gaze. Everything pictured in the icon is so arranged that it enters into the viewer’s field of vision. All lines converge—in terms of both their meaning and their geometry—in the spectator’s prayerful gaze. Iconic space unfolds in all directions around the person who prays and draws that person into this space, where objects can often be seen from three or even four sides at once.

Because icons portray eternity and culminated time, events that happened at different moments and in different places are gathered together in a single icon. If we look at an icon that depicts the birth of Jesus, we find the Christ

child in his manger in a cave alongside a reclining Mother of God, angels bearing the glad tidings to shepherds, the Magi riding over the mountain tops in pursuit of the star of Bethlehem, and also the venerable Joseph together with nurse maids bathing the infant. A whole series of events connected with Christmas have been gathered in a single space that unfolds scroll-like before us.

By using the depiction of one event to reveal another, this scroll unfolds in the temporal dimension as well. The Nativity of Christ icon depicts the beginning of Jesus' path on this earth, but it also discloses the end of that path. Observe the image of the Christ child lying in the manger with the darkness of the cave looming in the background.

Look closely and you will notice that the manger resembles a coffin—and the swaddling clothes, a burial shroud. The iconographer's intent here is plain: the Savior is born and is lying in his crib, but in another cave, a tomb, that same Savior will be placed in a shroud after having accepted death. We continue to perceive the iconographer's intent when we witness the angel standing next to the cave as not only the bearer of the good news of the birth of Jesus, but also as the messenger of his Resurrection. In this way, the icon unites the beginning and the end of Jesus' earthly sojourn.

Canonical icons of saints portray no physical or spiritual defects of any kind, because the saints are considered already transfigured by the Spirit. At the same time, this movement from matter to Spirit never leads to the disappearance of the physical principle altogether—and in particular, it never leads an iconographer to the use of abstract art, or to the use of symbols and signs that make no use of an anthropomorphic form. That would contradict Christ's very nature by transforming him into a disembodied being. For the same reason, icons do not make use of animal forms in such a context. For example, using the head of a dog to symbolize the head of Saint Christopher—a symbolism used in Coptic (and certain other) art forms—was denounced at one of the ecumenical councils. Because Christ took on flesh and became man, it was decided that the human countenance is itself sacred and should not be replaced by the form of some other creature.

Far from negating the flesh, Orthodox iconography blesses and transfigures the flesh. Even as flesh is transformed and sanctified, sometimes we see images of disease or suffering. We see this only in the pictorial images

around the edges of the icon, portraying scenes from the life of one of the saints. In an icon's central panel, however, where the saint is shown in heavenly glory, we no longer find any depictions of suffering or sores, mutilation or defect, for in the kingdom of heaven we are made whole. The blind person sees, those who are crippled walk, the dead return to life.

No matter how heroic or distinguished people may have been in their earthly existence, this aspect is disregarded in icons. An icon is not a portrait of earthly existence; it is the image of one who already inhabits the kingdom of God. While iconographers do not ignore the individuality or the characteristic external traits of the saints they portray (gender, age, hairstyle, facial hair, a special headdress or other distinguishing mark), the saints nonetheless appear to us in a form that is distinct from all such characteristics, suggesting that the saint has left all earthly passions behind and peers out at us from a separate world.

When we look at icons, the face always strikes us as the central feature. Here's why: it is the face that testifies to the saint's individuality and personhood. Iconographers even have special terms to distinguish between what is and is not "personal" in an icon. Individual elements are considered either personal (*lichnoe*) or circumstantial (*dolichno*).¹ In the category of the personal, we find not only the features of the face, but also the hands. These speak to us of what is truly connected with the person. Everything else in an icon—trees, hills, buildings, clothing, frame, and so forth—all relates to the circumstantial.

Gestures also have high significance in icons. An icon of the Savior, for example, offers a gesture of blessing. The Mother of God in an icon raises her hands heavenward. An icon of Saint Seraphim of Sarov shows him pressing his hands to his breast, and the prophet Elijah cups his hand to his ear in order to listen to God. Through gestures icons communicate the emotions that are often absent from the faces.

Eyes, which are also part of the personal aspect of icons, have special significance. In the most ancient icons the eyes are portrayed wide open. "The eyes are the window to the soul"—this well-known expression applies particularly well to an icon. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples that "the light in the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light" (Luke 11:34). Only through

a successful treatment of the eyes can an iconographer succeed in what is most important: communicating the sanctity of the person portrayed. The accentuated eyes create in us the impression that it is not we who look at the icon, but rather the icon that is looking at us.

It is light more than anything else that expresses the transcendent in icons. Icons portray light, but they do not portray shadow. There is no night in an icon; there is only an eternal day where bodies cast no shadows. A traditional icon never makes use of chiaroscuro, variations in light and shade evoked by an external source of light that makes one side of the image appear in the light, and the other in shadow. The special place held by light is seen in the fiery images of the Stylites by Theophanes (also known as Theophan the Greek) and in Andrei Rublev's radiant angels, so clearly suffused with divine energies.

Icons are painted (or *written*, rather, as most iconographers phrase it) by light upon light. Iconographers have always paid particular attention to the radiance of faces. Light is also used to draw clothing, landscapes, and architectural elements. A variety of specific techniques are used to portray what Gregory of Palamas called "the uncreated light," including *probelka* (the use of lighter shades of a given color for highlighting), *assist* (a manner of painting fine gold lines), and *dvizhki* (white lines used to heighten the face or hands). Though the techniques are various, the meaning underlying each of them is the same: they express the divine energies that suffuse the entire world.

In different places and at various times, iconographers developed a wide variety of often highly individual techniques for depicting light, and they continued to do so through the second half of the sixteenth century. Until that point, light had always been central in the icon. But when light began to fade from icons—despite the fact that the subject matter and the iconographic tradition remained unchanged in every other respect—the icon itself began to die out. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this uncreated light came to be replaced by naturalistic use of light and shade. The resulting art continued to be a form of religious painting, but it was no longer an icon in the canonical sense.

Central to expressing light in icons is the gold background. Indeed, in centuries past, this golden background was even called light, since saints